

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000281

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/01/2015

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL BA

SUBJECT: POLICE ARREST WEBMASTER OF BAHRAIN ON-LINE
INTERNET SITE

REF: A. MANAMA 273

B. MANAMA 270

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Police arrested "Bahrain On-Line" webmaster Ali Abdul Imam February 27 and detained him for 15 days on charges of incitement against the government and spreading false rumors, charges that carry a maximum sentence of six years in jail, according to Bahraini newspapers. Two technical supervisors of the website, Sayed Mohammed Al Mousawi and Hussein Yousef, were detained by the police February 28 in connection with the case. The public prosecutor's office announced that the arrests were made in response to a complaint submitted by the Ministry of Information. The 27-year old Abdul Imam runs the website, available at www.bahrainonline.org, which functions as a forum for posting speeches and statements and participating in chat rooms on national, international, and religious issues. The site has been banned inside Bahrain since 2002, but administrators find technical ways to route users to the site and so evade the ban. The site has an estimated membership of about 20,000 and gets some 80,000 hits per day.

2. (SBU) According to Embassy sources and the press, the website is hosted on a server in the United States. Following Abdul Imam's arrest, police also interrogated his 32-year old sister Fatima because a phone line that connected to a server in the U.S. two years ago was in her name. She was not arrested and was released after two hours.

3. (SBU) Forty-five supporters of Abdul Imam held a silent vigil in front of the public prosecutor's office February 28. They held a banner reading, "Where is Freedom of Expression?" and wore tape over their mouths to symbolize their position that Abdul Imam had been silenced. Bahrain Human Rights Society lawyer Mohammed Al Mutawa said he would seek Abdul Imam's immediate release from detention. Leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq condemned the arrest and said it was forming a lawyers' committee to defend Abdul Imam.

4. (SBU) Abdul Imam's family stated publicly that, though he runs the website, he does not post his own views. Rather, members write their comments in the many forums that are live at any given time. Currently, under "National Forum," the most popular page of the site, most of the postings concern Abdul Imam's arrest. Some of the other chat rooms focus on foreign affairs, religious topics, the recent constitutional conference, and general discussion issues. There is also an English language forum, which has at the top of the postings newspaper articles about Abdul Imam's arrest.

5. (C) Bahrain On-Line is considered to reflect the views of Shia rejectionists who are more religious, hardline, and skeptical of Bahrain's reform movement than the more mainstream Shia community. Despite his family's assertion, our contacts have observed postings by the website's administrators, including Abdul Imam. Chat room participants tend to question the motives of the King, Crown Prince, and Prime Minister, coming from a base position that Shia in Bahrain will face discrimination as long as the Sunni Al Khalifa family rules the country. The website played a role in organizing demonstrations for Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja during his detention in fall 2004 and, according to some, contributed to the ultimately uncompromising position Al Khawaja supporters adopted with regard to a face-saving deal with the government. One Embassy contact, a serious and credible Shia political analyst, referred to Abdul Imam and his supporters as "radicals."

6. (C) Comment: The question on many people's minds is, "Why now?" The government has known about Bahrain On-Line for years, and while the website serves as a place to air views of all kinds, including those opposed to the government and royal family, our contacts did not notice any specific posting or postings that would have led to Abdul Imam's arrest at this time. We note that the arrest took place at a time of heightened GOB sensitivity over the perceived Iranian role inside Bahrain (Ref B) and the royal family's unified front concerning preserving national security and ensuring national unity (Ref A). The Ambassador will raise the case in upcoming meetings with senior officials.

